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INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
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RHMFIUU/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL//PASS TO USCENTCOM FWD//
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STATE FOR NEA/ARPI, NEA/PPD AND S/CT
INFO NSC FOR ABRAMS, DOD/OSD FOR SCHENKER AND MATHENY
LONDON FOR ARAB MEDIA OFFICE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREL KPAO QA ALJAZEERA

SUBJECT: AL JAZEERA ENGLISH SAYS IT WILL LAUNCH AFTER RAMADAN

REF: DOHA 1301 and previous

¶1. (U) Summary: The Managing Director of Al Jazeera International told DCM the English language channel would likely launch in late October/early November, with limited U.S. distribution, at least initially. End summary.

¶2. (U) DCM, accompanied by PAO, made a courtesy call 9/13 on Nigel Parsons, Managing Director of the English language Al Jazeera TV channel scheduled for launch this year. Highlights of the conversation are as follows:

LAUNCH EXPECTED END OCTOBER/EARLY NOVEMBER

¶3. (U) Parsons said that all four AJI hubs (Doha, Washington, London and Kuala Lumpur) are currently in rehearsal mode. They are to move to a 24hr/5 days a week rehearsal schedule in the next couple of weeks, and would be on a 24/7 rehearsal schedule by the end of September. AJI would be ready to "flip the switch" to go live by the end of Ramadan, he said. (Note: Ramadan is expected to begin o/a 24 September this year and end o/a October 24. End note.) He said technical issues with the channel's state of the art fiber-optic/high definition television technology still remain, but he expects them to be sorted out "in the next couple of weeks."

AT HOME ON THE AL JAZEERA COMPOUND

¶4. (SBU) Parsons received Emboffs in the recently-constructed, state-of-the-art AJI offices, located opposite the Al Jazeera Arabic offices on their compound in Doha. When asked about rumors of tension between the Arabic and English channels, Parsons said the move on to the compound, which occurred a month and a half ago, has contributed to reducing that tension by exposing the two teams to each other on a daily basis, in the course of joint production, editorial and other planning meetings. He said the appointment of Arabic channel director Wadah Khanfar as Director-General of the overall Al Jazeera Network has also helped, since "now he is responsible for both of us." He confirmed that the new channel would retain the name "Al Jazeera International" until launch, but would at some point thereafter be known as "Al Jazeera English." As previously mentioned by Wadah Khanfar, the Network prefers to reserve the "International" designation to also cover future non-Arabic language Al Jazeera Channels, such as French, Spanish, Urdu, etc.

¶ 15. (U) Parsons described for DCM the proposed format of AJI programming (reflets), which he said would be geared more toward analysis than traditional satellite news - fewer and longer stories, with a focus on field reporting. He said AJI would be fully staffed at 750 employees worldwide, but is currently short of that number by approximately 100. He noted difficulties in hiring Arab nationals in Doha, due to Qatari Interior Ministry's clearance requirements, which result in frequent hold-ups or denials for Arab nationals.

U.S. DISTRIBUTION WILL BE LIMITED, BUT PRESENT

¶ 16. (SBU) Citing security reasons, Parsons declined to name the U.S. cable companies which have agreed to carry AJI upon launch. He said penetration into the U.S. market would not be "coast-to-coast" but that AJI would have "a couple of cable pockets." He implied that these would be in areas with significant Arab-American populations. He noted that U.S. cable carriers are trying to steer AJI toward "ethnic" subscription bouquets, but AJI is resisting and would prefer to be included in a basic non-subscription package. Parsons said he is counting on demand from U.S. customers to drive more cable companies to offer Al Jazeera. As previously mentioned to Emboffs by AJN Director-General Wadah Khanfar (reflets), Parsons said AJI would be available upon launch via broadband to anyone with a fast internet connection. In his estimation, AJI would exceed an audience of 40 million upon launch.

ADVERTISING - STILL LIMITED

¶ 17. (SBU) Asked about advertisers for the new channel, Parsons said that area was the responsibility of a local company called Qatar Media, which he characterized as "very reactive rather than proactive." The channel had "some" advertisers and had turned down some offers of sponsorship (including Qatar Fertilizers Company, he said, noting that such a sponsor would not appeal to the youth audience AJI is targeting). Although the eventual plan is for AJI to generate revenue, this is not a priority at the moment and in the final analysis, the Al Jazeera Sports Channel would be looked at more as the cash cow of the Network, said Parsons.

PARSONS' FUTURE AT AL JAZEERA

¶ 18. (SBU) Asked about his personal plans, Parsons, who was named as AJI Managing Director in late 2004, said although he does not see himself in Doha for an extended period of time (i.e. five years or more), he would like to stay on to see the channel established after launch. (Note: unconfirmed local rumor has it that Parsons may not survive in his position long after the channel launch, due to friction with senior Arabic channel representatives over the preservation of the Al Jazeera Arabic "brand" and identity across both channels. End note.)

COMMENT

¶ 19. (SBU) Parsons' comments accord with those made to Emboffs in the past by AJN Director-General Wadah Khanfar (reflets), indicating that - whatever tensions may exist between the two - they are in agreement on their public message.
Ratney